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Steven D. Paulson

Internal Clarity of Scripture and the Modern World. Luther and Erasmus Revisited

Any two people eventually disagree about the meaning of Scripture and produce two interpretations. The conflict between these interpretations of the words of Scripture appears inevitable and irresolvable, so to keep peace the two must ignore the differences as long as they are able. Then, when discord overwhelms them, a judge outside Scripture is sought to settle the argument. Clarity of Scripture is practically proved irrelevant. In other words, Desiderius Erasmus' Scripture interpretation wins the day in contrast to Luther's. Erasmus taught *skepticism as a virtue* regarding "things that are above us," even if Scripture reveals such things as the exalted doctrines of the Trinity, the incarnation, the two natures of Christ, and the sin against the Holy Spirit. Willingness to suspend judgment allows a person to get along with neighbors who disagree by learning to live and let live. Stay with the things that can be known, Erasmus urged, such as the moral precepts in Scripture that align with natural knowledge of ethics so Scripture is not alone required for their use. But when discord arises between any two people – such as Erasmus and Luther – the solution was to find some *judge* that could command obedience *outside the text of Scripture itself*. For Erasmus that was the church in its magisterial teaching, which was the closest thing on earth to a common, universal, community with the power to make judgments stick for people who were not necessarily convinced of the veracity of the teaching.

In more recent days the search for a judge outside Scripture has sought a scientific community that is larger than the "religious" church, operating by a universal method of reason. It hates dogma, and so has turned harshly against the Lutherans of the seventeenth century, with an occasional interest in Luther himself as a puppet hero of individual freedom. But when this method is pursued, skepticism enters all aspects of Scripture, including Erasmus' "moral precepts." Scripture, church, and even the universal community of science is left behind either in favor of doubt or some form of "inner" experience as the mark of truth. Once Erasmus' line of argument is adopted, Scripture cannot stand long as an authority at all; certainly the large ma-

jority of people ignore it altogether; and even those in the church consider it a book of suggestions for forging a new and better way.

Those of us who undergo the authority for Scripture can commiserate as Scripture in the form of law is indeed an onerous burden. Even those who want to hold to an authority in Scripture for moral precepts rather than exalted doctrines fear a closed Scripture with rigid requirements that does not suit a modern age. Must women cover their heads? What of the toleration of slavery? Does Scripture allow or even demand corporal punishment? The solution commonly offered is to make of Scripture's authority a new, spiritual authority rather than an old paternal authority that sets its rules in cement. In other words, the solution to a rigid legalism seems to be a fluid, spiritual form of law that can change with the times. When Scripture was written, perhaps they did not understand sexuality as we do today; thus, we can take principles but not specific requirements from the text. This presumably allows one to escape "fundamentalism," and yet not fall into complete, individual skepticism. Yet all of this commonsense approach is unable to deliver peace and unity in the church (to say nothing of the whole world) because it has utterly confused the work of the Holy Spirit with the use of the law alone.

Erasmus provided Luther, who is of course "pre-modern" by definition, a glimpse of the future in which we now live. We have a series of conflicts of interpretation regarding doctrine and morals between individuals, denominations, churches, religions, quasi-religions, and secularity. Various attempts of adjudication have always failed since they look outside Scripture for what must be in Scripture. If we take up the dispute between Erasmus and Luther, we can identify the crucial mistake of this approach to Scripture and its dismal failure. The root problem lies in the misunderstanding of the Holy Spirit, specifically the sense of the term "inner." A misuse of the word "inner" has become catastrophic for Scriptural authority. Yet the proper use made by Luther of *inner* is realistic and truly freeing so that Scripture's two words of law and gospel emerge for preaching as the activity of the Spirit in the present.

Scripture and the Apocalypse

Scripture is not a book on a table waiting to be interpreted by the wisdom of this world. It is an attack on this world by the Triune God in the person of the Holy Spirit, who is in the midst of an apocalypse that divides the old world from the new, Flesh from Spirit. Just as Jacob was attacked at the ford of the Jabbok, so is the one who understands Scripture under the Spirit's attack. Erasmus was like a little child hiding under the bed, hoping the bogey man would not find him, but when it comes to Scripture, the Apocalypse of the Holy Spirit cannot be ignored. The difference between the law and the

gospel was not a method of interpretation for Luther; it was undergoing the two absolute works of God, the first that kills and the second that gives new life. So “the letter kills, the Spirit gives life” (2 Cor 3:6) is not Scripture on the one hand, and some inner movement of the Spirit on the other, but the use of Scripture by the Holy Spirit in the two preaching offices that have become a matter of death and life for the hearers.

Immediately, this focuses on a central problem in the exchange between Luther and Erasmus. Erasmus was intent on blaming bad interpretation of Scripture on sinners, with the hope that saints could give a proper interpretation in order to keep God from being blamed for sin. Erasmus sensed the modern issue: if God is blamed for evil, no one will believe. Theology and all of thought becomes theodicy. Consequently, the sinner was the one who failed with Scripture; the saint succeeded. The one failed to do the law, and the other did it. What could be more religious than that? Good interpretation leads to life; bad leads to death. Good interpretation is moral; bad is immoral. But what Erasmus was doing by advocating religion and church in general was avoiding the apocalyptic truth, the reality of his and our situation before God. He wanted to know the reason why some hear Scripture and others do not, and the answer had to be found, he was sure, in the interpreter who came to Scripture asking what the book wanted to say. A flaw was found in the interpreter, not the Scripture. This is what made the difference between false and true, between sinner and saint, between those who die and those who do not. One listened to the moral precept and did it, the other did not.

But Luther knew that Scripture and the Holy Spirit were not left to a person to use or misuse. They were at war with all humans. The Holy Spirit was using Scripture first to attack and destroy sinners. In order to do this, the first work of the Holy Spirit is to see to it that people cannot hear, just as it was given to Isaiah in that most awful of truths:

And he said, Go, and say to this people: ‘Hear and hear, but do not understand; see and see, but do not perceive.’ Make the heart of this people fat, and their ears heavy, and shut their eyes; lest they see with their eyes, and hear with their ears, and understand with their hearts, and turn and be healed (Isa 6:9–10).

In order to get God off the hook of destroying life in this old world, and making the law an instrument of death rather than of life, Erasmus was willing to make two tremendous concessions in the form of monastic humility. One was to accept the burden of skepticism that kept a person from pride; the other was the sacrifice of personal liberty for obedience to an external authority outside and above Scripture itself, which Erasmus piously offered to the papacy. Neither of these were small concessions, and no doubt cost Erasmus plenty as a harsh critic of the church and a relatively free thinking man of enlightened humanism. But what this really cost was denial of God’s

revelation of the apocalypse: "Grace to you and peace from God the Father and our Lord Jesus Christ, who gave himself for our sins to deliver us from the present evil age, according to the will of our God and Father" (Gal 1:3–4). In its place Erasmus resolved to settle all disputes according to the rules of this old world and thus the law alone. The loss of the apocalypse that rips apart the ages is therefore a loss of the Spirit; the loss of the Spirit is also a loss of Scripture, and the loss of Scripture means that humans are finally confined to their personal skepticism and the desperate search for an external judge. This dismal logic required Erasmus to make "spirit" into a new kind of law that does not accuse, but exonerates. Indeed, whether modern theologians have recognized it or not, they have turned Luther into an advocate of Erasmus' position regarding Scripture and so made a mess of the sixteenth century debate and left us individual skeptics seeking a collective judge outside Scripture.

Inner Clarity of the Scripture

In the midst of his answer to Erasmus on the free choices of the will Luther uttered a term that would become the watchword of our modern situation before Scripture, "*interiorem claritatem scripturae sanctae*."¹ Luther meant it as a direct opposition to Erasmus' epicurean skepticism, but the spirit of our age claimed it as its own and turned it into Luther's opposite. Luther did not invent the phrase. He was paraphrasing Paul in Romans 8:16, the Holy Spirit bearing witness to our spirit. Luther could hardly have foreseen what would become of this phrase when both the external preacher and the text of Scripture would be removed and a fictitious inner spirit would be substituted that communed immediately with the Holy Spirit. For Luther inner clarity was a direct work of the Spirit to enlighten a darkened heart, and its opposite, the inner obscurity, was a direct work of the Spirit to darken the heart. Internal clarity was the special gift of God, as Luther says. The darkening of hearts is simply God's wrath at sin. It must be done and will be done by God's own will. The reason that some do not hear is that God sees to it that they cannot hear. This is what Erasmus would not stand. It has always bothered people because it becomes clear to them that there is no overcoming this darkening of the heart by God through some work of their own, especially by means of a work of the law. So God appears to be an evil ogre who leaves no room for escape to an erstwhile free will. Instead of acknowledging the truth of God's condemnation of the entire world, the sinner always revolts and blames the Creator, as the pot saying to the potter, "Why have

1 *D. Martin Luthers Werke*, Weimar 1883–2009 [henceforth WA], 18: 653,19.

you made me thus?" Recall the forlorn attempt of Erasmus to make Pharaoh the darkener of his own heart and let God off the hook. Every little argument over texts of Scripture in Erasmus' *Diatriba* comes back to this point: the work of the Holy Spirit to condemn and kill is handed over to the free will so that the law becomes the hope that the free will, one day, will choose wisely. Otherwise, what would God be but the worker of evil?

Few terms are more important to grasp in theology than these two: "internal," and "spirit." Modern philosophy, and so theology, is a theory of Spirit. It takes the phrase "internal clarity of Scripture" away from Luther and uses it in favor of Erasmus – even though it will go far beyond anything Erasmus had dreamed either. As such, it claims that "the Trinity is truth."² What could be more religious sounding and modern in its theology? The Father and the Son progress to the Spirit. "Inner" has taken on a whole field of meaning that opposes itself to Luther, even when its practitioners recite Luther's use of the term as the great discovery of the Reformation.

None describes this modern use of "inner" in relation to spirit better than G. W. F. Hegel. First, the Spirit is "in and for itself," and second, humanity is required to participate in this truth. Therein lies the secret of the cognates "in," "inner," "internal," which are so small and yet grave in their consequences. *Internal* is typically taken to be a divine reference for what remains capable in man to participate in God despite whatever fall from glory was endured. *Inner* is imagined as the remaining location for the human connection to God since only spirit is capable of Spirit as like likes like. The fact that God is Spirit is understood to mean that there is room in God to come and play a part for that which is not God. Participation in this "roomy" God is in the form of consciousness in the inner man that God is reconciling himself to the world, indeed the world *must* be reconciled to God.³ Participation in the Trinity cannot be the kind of immediate pantheism of Spinoza, where a creature plays a role in the Creator by ontological necessity. There is a potential capacity that human nature possesses for participating in trinity that must be made actual – the immediate, natural, paternal relation to God must be negated, and the new, mediate, spirit-relation to God must elevate the person into becoming actual spirit. Father must give way to Spirit. Inner spirit must echo outer spirit in the form of a participation that transcends created nature and enters the higher form of spirit as perfect law that makes humans more than they are by nature.

2 Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, *Vorlesungen über die Geschichte der Philosophie*, G. J. P. J. Boland (ed.), Leiden 1908, p. 694 ("[...] die Dreieinigkeit das Wahre sei [...]"). English: *Lectures on the History of Philosophy. Part Three: Medieval and Modern Philosophy*, E. S. Haldane and Frances H. Simson (trans.), 1896, reprint Lincoln, Nebraska 1995, pp. 1–2.

3 Hegel, *Philosophie* (note 2), p. 694: "[...] dass der Mensch das Bedürfnis hat, dieser Wahrheit teilhaftig zu werden [...]."

Therein lies the other major issue of modern theology. It not only is a theory of Spirit adapted from Hegel in some way, but this Spirit is none other than a theory of Infinite Law. The Spirit is Law that progresses and frees infinitely, rather than law that is closed, coercive, and always accuses. This spirit form of law evolves to adapt to changing circumstances. Adaptability of law to history is believed to be the only escape from the accusation of the law so that law is not an unchanging eternal, but is historically eternal, not "eternal" in the old Greek sense of outside time. Spirit's eternal is "infinite," always and forever proceeding ahead of the man whose inner self seeks to be an echo of that spirit-law by not merely preserving the past, but opening the future by making the law ever more universal, more inclusive of the many parts of Spirit, ever more proceeding as it leads into perfect infinity.

This is what has happened in theology and philosophy with that little word "inner." The inner is a spirit that learns to echo the pioneer Spirit, like temporarily separated birds whose sweet calls lead the way back to unity and into the infinite future by negating the "natural" and alienated, and becoming all spirit. Hegel surmised, the process of moving from nature to spirit reached its "ultimate point of intensity (*zu seiner letzten Intensität*)" in Jesus Christ:

Now since man really is this process of being the negation of the immediate, and from this negation attaining to himself – to a unity with God – he must consequently renounce his natural will, knowledge, and existence. This giving up of his natural existence is witnessed in Christ's sufferings and death, and in his resurrection and elevation to the right hand of the Father. Christ became a perfect man, endured the lot of all men, death; as man he suffered, sacrificed himself, gave up his natural existence, and thereby elevated himself above it. In him this process, this conversion of his other-being into spirit, and the necessity of pain in the renunciation of the natural man is witnessed; but this pain, the pain of feeling that God himself is dead, is the starting point of holiness and of the elevation to God.⁴

Jesus Christ has become a model to imitate. The sacramental is gone because the gospel is gone, and with this the story of religion is the "elevation to God," rather than the Apocalypse of the Son. The result of Hegel's spirit process is to say "man is not by nature what he ought to be." Liberation is the overcoming of the natural by becoming spirit, thereby "Man makes himself divine," not in an unspiritual way – but by means of reconciliation, renunciation, and elevation so that Man is not merely as he was originally created, but what he ought to be.⁵ The three favorite topics of recent theology emerged by the early nineteenth century, 1) the doctrine of the Trinity with the superiority of the Spirit over Father and Son, 2) theosis or divinization, and 3) the essence of the Spirit in the form of the infinitely evolving

4 Ibid., p. 5.

5 Ibid., p. 697: "Der Mensch macht sich göttlich, aber auf 'geistige' d. h. nicht auf 'unmittelbare' Weise [...]."

law. This recent scheme assumes that the human's first condition as creature must be abrogated; it must evolve, be transformed, elevate from creaturely shame to divine glory. In this same sense God himself is spirit in that God transforms the hidden, divine unity into the Other of himself in order from this Other to "turn back again into himself." That is the fundamental Idea of Christianity ("die Grundidee des Christentums") for Hegel. All of this is in the mind of God, and from God's perspective appears immanent with no history or development, but from the perspective within history (that is, the human perspective with God's providence set aside), everything indeed appears contingent, accidental, and *as if* it may have been different. Thus, all of history, philosophy, and theology is none other than theodicy. Theodicy is "justification of God," in the face of suffering and evil – the very same suffering which turned Erasmus to his interpretation of Scripture that released God from responsibility for death – which is "a vindication of our Idea," the Christian Idea that in Christ God has become man, and man has become God.⁶ Trinity, theosis, legal infinity are knit together as the means by which to explain how God is righteous, even though he "allows" suffering and evil to exist. How far we have come from God attacking this world apocalyptically and creating new!

Fear of Orthodoxy

I rehearse this unsurpassable description of our modern situation in honor of Professor Häggglund because it reveals the reason for our current insoluble problems with Scripture's authority, and explains why the great orthodox Lutheran teachers of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries have been reviled ever since the eighteenth century. It accounts for the hatred of dogma, which is seen as old, paternal law, and explains the preference for "spirit" as if doctrine itself put shackles on the freedom of man. The recent conundrum regarding authority of Scripture in science and the church finally arrives at Erasmus' pathetic plea in his Introduction to the *Diatriba*: "Who will give us certainty?"

From that question Erasmus began to think that humans should not be so set on certainty. Perhaps we ought to condition ourselves to live with doubt and turn this into a virtue called "faith"? How strange that *faith* has come to mean something that reasonable people must *doubt*. This current situation allows us to return to a crucial moment in Luther's own history for a better understanding of the Spirit (and so Trinity) than that under which we labor presently. The modern world is determined to turn Luther on his

6 Hegel, Philosophie (note 2), p. 7.

head. They want him as a hero but do not want what he actually says in the use of "internal clarity of Holy Scripture," which Luther understood eschatologically. It is this use by Luther that would set the groundwork for the later orthodox teaching on Scripture, as Professor Hägglund has noted on many occasions,⁷ which we find at its height in Johann Gerhard:

The first [testimony] is the internal witness of the Holy Spirit, who, as He bears witness to the spirit of believers that they are the sons of God, Rom. 8:16, so, also, efficaciously convinces them, that in the Scriptures the voice of their Heavenly Father is contained; and God is the only fit and authentic witness. To this testimony belongs the lively sense of the godly in daily prayer and in the exercises of penitence and faith, the grace of consoling and strengthening the mind against all kinds of adversities, temptations, persecutions, etc., which the godly daily experience in reading and meditating upon Scripture.⁸

It is the persecutions, the *Anfechtungen*, to which this internal witness is pointed. The apocalypse remains here. The only thing missing in Gerhard's description is that this internal witness of the Holy Spirit is actually clarity, certainty *in the words of Scripture themselves*, not merely in the general sense that God is the one speaking in Scripture (and always speaks the truth), but that faith hears God speaking *for me*, on my side in the promise of Christ. Internal witness, in other words, is not a general acceptance of God speaking in Scripture, a theory of inspiration, but the voice of faith that confesses the words preached are indeed "for me." It is the confession of faith, not of a principle of authority.

Everything regarding internal testimony of the Holy Spirit hangs upon Romans 8:16, as Gerhard noticed. Luther did not explicitly cite this source in his debate with Erasmus. The source he did cite was 1 Corinthians 2:15, but this was simply the anthropological side of the theological truth expressed in Romans 8. So we hold both these verses as the center of our discussion: "The Spirit himself testifies to our spirit that we are children of God" (Romans 8:16) and "The preacher [Spirit-man] judges all things, but is himself to be judged by no one" (1 Corinthians 2:15). Upon these two verses hangs the matter of Scripture's authority, especially since the modern world is based upon a willful misunderstanding of Luther's term "internal clarity of Scripture."

7 I mention here the English translation, Bengt Hägglund, "Pre-Kantian Hermeneutics", in: *Lutheran Quarterly* 20/2006, pp. 318–336.

8 Heinrich Schmid, *The Doctrinal Theology of the Evangelical Lutheran Church*, Charles A. Hay and Henry E. Jacobs (trans.), Philadelphia 1889, p. 37.

Inner subjectivity and outer community

Nothing is a more important cause of the misuse of Scripture than the idea that Spirit is a reference to internal subjectivity's *limits of human knowledge* of an external object. As we know, modernity recognizes freedom in what it calls "the turn to the subject," or Kant's Copernican revolution in thought. This distinguishes modern from pre-modern, or critical from pre-critical thinkers, who are then derisively called dogmatists. Moderns hold that dogmatists *think something* while ignoring "the fact" that they are *the kinds of people who are thinking* that something. The critical have a self-referential loop for all knowledge of facts. Dogmatists of the Lutheran kind in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries who attempted to teach the distinction of law and gospel supposedly skipped self-reference, and acted as if they knew facts without any reference to their subjective equipment doing the knowing. Critical thinkers believe they understand the necessary correlation of thought and being at the root of all thinking: "the world is only world insofar as it appears to me as world, and the self is only self insofar as it is face to face with the world, that for whom the world discloses itself."⁹

This is indeed so close to Luther's description of faith that it has commonly been mistaken for it. Promises from Christ mean nothing *in general*, they must have the subject, the *for you*, with them or they are worse than nothing. A promise not given to you damns. But Luther knew the importance of the pronoun, the subject, is not a reference of the self to the self. Faith is not *inner* or subjective in that sense at all. Faith requires an external preacher – faith comes by hearing (Rom 10:17). But modernity has turned the "for me" of preaching into the "from me" of speculation – it has turned from God to the self as the source of the word. It does this for a noble reason. It wants to keep God free of evil and so free of the apocalypse. Instead of seeking resemblance between subject and object so that the subject fairly, neutrally represented the object "as it is in itself," modern criticism demands inter-subjectivity that approaches universality. Facts and feelings are henceforth distinguished not by objectivity and subjectivity, but by two kinds of subjectivity – the kind that cannot be made universal, and the kind that is universal – or as close as one can get to universal. One says "I feel warm," the other says, "the sun warms the earth." One depends upon the individual alone; the other upon a communal consensus – whatever can reasonably be shared by a community. The former concerns the subjectivity of the individual, the latter the subjectivity of the community which requires a belief that there is a *shared spirit* of the community that can be divined.

9 I cite as a recent example, Francis Wolff, *Dire le Monde*, Paris 1997, p. 11.

One can anticipate where this will end up without going through the history of modern philosophy. Recall Erasmus' search for a judge outside of Scripture. Modern people are looking for a community to be judge. They are like children who want discipline, but only from a recognizable, trusted authority. Idealism holds that there is a universal spirit that is accessible; the post-modern, post-liberal will hold there is no universal community, but there are varieties of communities in which one must operate with a shared set of grammatical assumptions or a "common spirit." Thus, universal community desired by science gives way to anthropology of local tribes or communities existing in combination and contradiction, side-by-side without an absolute spirit that unites them.

This is the point to which we have come in modern biblical exegesis – one either clings to historical-critical science with its universal, foundational claim that stands outside Scripture and judges what can and cannot stand the test of time, or one moves to the unassailable claims of church communities shaped by their unique traditions that interpret Scripture according to the "rules of grammar" adopted by the biggest and best of these communities to which one can belong.¹⁰

Most theologians have chosen the lesser of evils, having thrown in their lot with those who hold that doctrine has validity within the community of faith, and, of course, they assert the validity of the old Roman claim that the church authorizes Scripture and adjudicates differences of interpretation by developing rules of a commonly held grammar, especially in the worship of Christians. Lutherans in this case appear to wake up long after the Reformation's teaching of *sola scriptura* to the truth that a *magisterium* of teaching in the church must be established to weather the ravages of time. Truth is then communal in the way a language functions within a community. From this perspective, one can commiserate with Cardinal Ratzinger, now Pope Benedict XVI, "the real antithesis in the concept of church between Roman Catholics and Protestants is not between scripture and tradition but between scripture and office. Protestants interpret Scripture without the Petrine Office, and therefore they are not *given* Scripture, but *take* it."¹¹ From the Roman Catholic position Lutherans are not even so good as to be atheistically scientific. They are merely individualists privately interpreting Scripture, thus *grasping* rather than *receiving* what the Spirit gives from Mother Church. Among Lutherans presently, the argument of Scripture's authority swings

10 On the one side, exegetes of Scripture promote themselves as scientific since the presumed community is universal. One can find any number of practitioners; the latter that promotes the local community interpretation and seeks only to address the truth "of the church" is best represented by George Lindbeck.

11 Josef Ratzinger, "Ein Versuch zur Frage des Traditionsbegriffs", in: Karl Rahner and Josef Ratzinger, *Offenbarung und Überlieferung*, Freiburg 1965, p. 28.

between this individualistic, spiritual fanaticism like that among American evangelicals, and the collective spiritual fanaticism that seeks a remedy in church tradition and a church government that can enforce its collective will upon individuals in the mold of the Roman *magisterium*.

Inner testimony and inner clarity

There is a connection at this point between modern concerns and Luther's Reformation, but it is normally developed incorrectly. Scripture interpretation has gone very wrong since it is based on a false understanding of subjectivity, touted as the great discovery of German Idealism and attributed in origin to Luther's description of the "inner" work of the Holy Spirit. In fact, the development of the notion of Spirit that reached its zenith with Hegel is likely beholden to John Calvin's essential alteration of Luther's description of the Spirit's work, and so of Scripture's interpretation, so that inner *testimony of the Holy Spirit* is put in the place of Luther's *inner clarity of Scripture*. That observation awaits another essay. It can be said for the moment that the understanding of Paul in Romans 8:16 is at issue since Calvin made the witness of the Holy Spirit into a seal placed upon work of the Holy Spirit, or faith into a reference to the self examining the self to find evidence of faith. Thus the Spirit's witness is with the "inner" man's witness in the form of a corroboration that the faith is there and is therefore certain. The man's self-examination or a relation of the self to itself indeed found faith that is confirmed by the form of worship that calls out "Abba, Father."¹² In Calvin's defense, he notes that the compound verb for witness "with" could better be construed as the Spirit "contesting" with our spirits – thus the apocalyptic reference. But he sets this aside and proceeds with the Spirit giving me sure and certain confidence of salvation by the presence of faith within, in direct contrast to God's external miracle. Testimony then too easily became merely "agreeing with," confirming, or approving, and literally makes the Spirit an addition or seal to Christ, and sacraments as unfulfilled signs.¹³ But when a martyr testifies in the kind of trial God brings against the whole world, that

12 John Calvin, *Commentary Upon the Epistles to the Corinthians*, John Pringle and Thomas Timme (trans.), Albany Oregon 1998, p. 44 on 1 Corinthians 1:6: "Even as the testimony, etc. Erasmus gives a different rendering, to this effect, 'that by these things the testimony of Christ was confirmed in them;' that is, by knowledge and by the word. The words, however, convey another meaning, and if they are not wrested, the meaning is easy – that God has sealed the truth of his gospel among the Corinthians, for the purpose of confirming it. Now, this might be done in two ways, either by miracles, or by *the inward testimony of the Holy Spirit*."

13 "We do not deny that God himself is present in his institution by the very present power of his Spirit. Nevertheless, that the administration of the sacraments which he has ordained may not be unfruitful and void, we declare that the inner grace of the spirit, as distinct from the

martyr is contesting against false teaching; he does not merely confirm inside himself what the Spirit gave externally. Faith does not see itself, or feel itself. Faith always clings to an external word. As Paul is arguing in Romans 8, one is suffering as a Christian, yet the Spirit contests against the flesh that I am indeed already dead to the flesh because of baptism and a new heir to God on account of Christ's promise given there.

Calvin's type of corroborative relation of Spirit's testimony to the human heart's testimony, or the making of faith into its own subject and object, allowed the thinkers of the nineteenth century to make their form of a subjective turn into the genius of the Reformation itself. But in the *Bondage of the Will* Luther does not call this the "inner testimony of the Holy Spirit." He calls this "internal clarity" that accompanies the external clarity of the preacher. The Holy Spirit's work is not to confirm from the outside what is really present in the inner man in the form of an outcry of faith, "Abba, Father."¹⁴ Nor could we say the inner matter of faith is a person's echo internally to what the Holy Spirit has been pleading outside in the form of a revelation or idea. Internal clarity for Luther remains totally the work of the Holy Spirit, and the person who is thus granted faith is and remains perfectly passive. Indeed, as Paul says bluntly, he is dead.

The *scopus* or context of any discussion of the Spirit's testimony must remain the rupture of worlds, and indeed that is what Paul means by the contention between Flesh and Spirit. For Luther, *internal* is not an inner movement of the person that correlates with the external word of Scripture in the form of introspection ("Do I have faith now?"); it is *eschatological* because it is a product of the Holy Spirit's double work, to kill and make alive (2 Cor 3:6). This is not a process of development in the human reflecting the causal influence of the Holy Spirit outside. It is the end of all process in the apocalyptic judgment of the cross of Christ that is death for the sinner, and the new creation in baptism by the Holy Spirit only and alone – out of nothing. There is a drastic mistake made by eighteenth and nineteenth century interpreters of Scripture and world history who think they have understood Luther and are completing the task he began, but in fact have not understood what "inner" and "spirit" mean, thus leading us into an impossible modern dilemma of choosing between two communal subjectivities, that of the *world* (scientific) or the *church*, in order to retain some authority for Scripture for those who care to engage it. They lost the eschatology, the work of the Holy Spirit to kill and make alive, because they lost the distinction of law and gospel. In so doing they were forced to make biblical authority into the author-

outward ministry, ought to be considered separately." John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, John McNeill (ed.), Ford Battles (trans.), Philadelphia 1960, 2: 1291 (§ 4.14.17).

14 So Luther says: "I cannot build on the fact that I believe", *Large Catechism, Book of Concord*, Robert Kolb and Timothy Wengert (eds.), Minneapolis 2000, p. 463, § 56.

ity of the law alone – either the infinite law of the universal community, or the ecclesiastical law of the church community. It may not be binding for all, but if you want to be a part of the church, you must accept its “rules of grammar,” its “doctrine,” its “canon of Scripture,” and its tradition of interpretation, or you give up the enterprise of theology altogether.

Luther and Erasmus on Spirit

It was Erasmus who recognized first that his trouble with Luther was over the interpretation of Scripture. When Luther began to see the scope of the problem, it was then that he responded to Erasmus' *Diatriba*. Interpretation of Scripture hangs upon who the Holy Spirit is and what he does. Luther's utterance “internal clarity of Scripture,” upon which modernity would build its edifice, appeared as the second of two great arguments regarding the Holy Spirit. The first was that the Holy Spirit “was no skeptic,” but instead was an assertor, a confessor, engaged in cosmic battle, not a neutral observer of the world “at peace,” an Epicurean who wishes nothing more than that humans would live together rather than haggle over doctrines that are “above us.” The second was the clarity of Scripture, whose very perspicuity is offensive to humans. Nevertheless, the Holy Spirit remains unrelenting in the use of Scripture to bring God's hiding to an end and reveal Christ who forgives sins. Luther dismantles the feigned religion of the Skeptic, who makes not-knowing into the human power that turns faith into its opposite, disbelief.

The Skeptic replaced faith with a fake power of patience or willingness to live within the limits of its reason, and thereby make the Holy Spirit into a purely passive sentiment – such as a charitable mind, and a lover of peace.¹⁵ Current theology is choked to death by theologians of love who want to make Spirit into a sentiment, an ideal, who allows them to preserve the law. But the Holy Spirit is not only not passive; he is active in the extreme: “He breaks in upon the whole world and convinces it of sin (John 16:8), as if challenging it to battle.”¹⁶ The Spirit is not waiting to be discovered by erstwhile explorers: the Holy Spirit is waging a final, cosmic battle against the powers that oppose the gospel. At the very least this means the Spirit is a person since only a person wages battle. Moreover, the Spirit is active, and intrudes and fights in this old world. Erasmus set up a system that demanded the activity of the free will and at the same time made the Spirit passive by removing the eschatological circumstance of faith. Free will is a cipher meant to silence the Spirit's eschatological war and create an illusory “epistemological”

15 Martin Luther, *Bondage of the Will*, J. Packer and O. Johnston (trans.), Grand Rapids 1957, p. 66.

16 Ibid., p. 67.

world that depends upon the mind's searching out a higher truth by turning the inner self into a voyageur of discovery. Luther calls Erasmus Ulysses. Ridding the world of the eschatological truth, that the Holy Spirit is waging war against it – and so against us – produces a preference for skepticism over faith. Currently this comes out in the form of cries to be willing to live with difference of interpretation, complexity, and disagreement in some higher churchly unity that prefers peace to sectarian rancor.

Skepticism thus confuses faith with “an undogmatic temper.” Imagine that! The Holy Spirit has become no more than the pure sentiment of a person wanting peace when the Holy Spirit is the very one waging the war! Not only is the passion missing from this skeptic's dream; so is the very person of the Holy Spirit. It was a longstanding problem in the Christian church to take faith to be a form of doubt that would not be certain of Christ's promise – unhesitatingly certain – lest it fall into the ditch of pride. But faith is certainty, and certainty is willingness to die for what is believed in. In order to give this faith the Holy Spirit “breaks in” to this old world, challenging it to battle by declaring Jesus Christ to be its one glory – a challenge to all the world's idols for which the Spirit is willing to die. On the other hand, sentiment means that the heart may be trying to do the right thing, but its conclusion is that belief (what you hang your trust upon) does not matter: what matters is keeping the world at peace – settling dispute. That is a non-eschatological world, in which the Holy Spirit does not wage war against the old evil world, but instead patiently awaits a thinker discovering the truth of spirit within himself. Well then, those seeking peace will not like it when the Holy Spirit breaks in and challenges the world to a battle over the crucified Christ, will they? Spirit is made into an internal sentiment or movement, and skepticism is a virtue that refuses to believe that which it cannot surely know, just as Socrates taught long ago.

A revelation came to Luther during Erasmus' attack on the teaching of the bound choices of the will. He saw the future on the horns of a dilemma. On one side was the horn of skepticism, disguised in the form of epistemological neutrality, regarding knowledge gained from Scripture and church teaching along with humility that seeks to ground its trust in what it does not know. Skepticism disciplines itself like a monk to operate within the severe limits of human knowledge. Spirit is a person who is doing battle, and the skeptic renders him an inner movement, a sentiment, which cannot be trusted as the basis of knowledge, but which nevertheless is the membrane of immediate knowledge that occurs when one is united with the divine and so in no need of external preachers. It is Spirit witnessing with my spirit about my spirit.

It is the external preacher that becomes the primary enemy of this theology, or better this anthropology, that lifts itself by the inner movement to

participate in the divine. The external preacher becomes danger to the inner person, the one who seeks to wrest control from the self and impose upon it a foreign truth, leaving the person without true spirit and eternally dependent upon another. What the preacher brought was considered “dogma,” which was part of the old assault on reason and true sentiment. It was an assault on the truth, which was unmediated and in that sense “inner.” The modern world would struggle to establish the inner life as the truth. But this left it with an insuperable problem of individualism, solipsism, and an end to any outward, external truth at all. The truth needed to be shared, communicated, or it left everyone lonely.

The answer to this problem was not to be found in a return of the preacher and the Holy Spirit’s assault on reason; it was to be found in a community to which one would rationally sacrifice autonomy and the inner life to a shared authority that would provide the inner self with certain benefits of society. Here is the second horn of the dilemma of modernity, in which Erasmus separates knowledge into two parts: one is the preserve of the inner man, and the other is “above us,” and sacrifices itself to the external authority of the church in the form of obedience to its doctrinal teaching on what, after all, is beyond and unnecessary for the life of the individual. The church would teach its Trinity and two natures of Christ and the like, which cannot be obtained by human reason, and the person would retain responsibility for the “moral precepts.” On one hand, the person himself became spirit in the form of a free will, and, on the other, rendered a chastised obedience to the judgment of a larger community, like the church, which saves a person from individualism, and the endless need for doubt. In other words, Luther glimpsed in Erasmus what we today call “modernity” and its appetite for destruction, first in the form of doubt that kills a preacher, second in the form of desperate flight into self-sacrificing obedience to something larger than the self. Inner became the individual, and outer the communal, and ever since these are held in tension as two horns of a dilemma regarding human freedom.

This revelation is finally what moved Luther to write against Erasmus and what elevated the debate far beyond Erasmus’ own grasp of the issue. Once again Luther was fighting a cosmic battle over the head of his opponent, bringing the matter of the bondage of the will under the apocalypse of the Holy Spirit. The revelation of what we call modernity was appalling to Luther since he saw the dilemma of cynicism and the desire to escape into totalitarianism – whether of the church or state. Modernity was destined to be a kind of infinite reform movement in church and society based upon Scripture interpretation (a church reformed, and always reforming) that rejects the distinction of law and gospel and puts in its place the distinction between what humans can know with reasonable assurance and what they

cannot know. This is why Luther recognized in Erasmus a like "spirit" of Reform, but the actual reformation of Erasmus was of an entirely different spirit than Luther's. Erasmus' was moral, Luther's eschatological. The future would be a struggle over the understanding of the Holy Spirit's use of the text of Scripture and therefore a struggle against the external preaching office as the means by which God's word was delivered to sinners. Modernity would become a sustained attack on the preacher, who would be replaced by a biblical interpreter who looked at Scripture through spectacles of his own, and learned to dwell within the limits of some community that judged what was allowed or not. The passive, apocalyptic, dead hearer of preaching was transformed into the active interpreter of Scripture, so that the turn to the subject was a thin disguise for the turn away from the preacher of the law and the gospel. The modern world turned against the preacher, killing him in order to save itself. It replaced the distinction of law and gospel with a distinction within the law alone: paternal conservation of law vs. spirited progression of law. Modernity would then become a confusion over the relation of the Spirit to preaching and Scripture, forcing the Spirit to work with the new fanged interpreter of Scripture in the form of the inspiration that could think of Scripture only according to the law, and the Spirit only as the creator of a new form of law for a new day.

Erasmus was traditional and old according to his method of reading Scripture (or any book for that matter) in one fundamental sense; he believed that the work of the exegete was to harmonize apparent contradictions in Scripture, acting as something of a neutral referee. The means of the harmony thus lay outside of Scripture itself according to an old pagan assumption – that *the universal Law was the source of all harmony*, all oneness, all unity, and so, in the end, all truth that lasts through the ravages of time. The law outside Scripture would overcome the changes that inevitably come due to history's strange (from the human perspective), accidental turns.

However, Erasmus was very modern in another sense. Legal harmony is not to be found in the Scripture itself. It must be provided from the outside of the book, and the law that demands a free will's acceptance was the means to provide it. But the universal law of reason is not to be accessed by individual thought – in fact that only leads to the loss of law altogether in the form of cynical doubt. But then Erasmus made his modern move. Instead of running from doubt – embrace it! But only as an individual. Be an "I don't know-er," with no shame, but then commit the great act of sacrifice of the individuality to the corporate life, which for Erasmus was, of course, the church. One does not even rely, as Descartes would later, on a God who would not deceive you; instead one relies on the judge from the outside, the interpretative authority of the church. Why? Because the law changes in its details as applied to a new historical situation, while not fundamentally changing in its ori-

gin or goal. God must have established an authority on earth to make new laws; otherwise, law ossifies and becomes untrue over time. The law must have been given to make us righteous; otherwise, God would be forthrightly evil. Modernity is thus a theory of spirit and law together. Law is no longer the unchanging origin of things in terms of the Father but is the infinite authority of the Holy Spirit, who is none other than the spirit of the law as it proceeds, grows, evolves, and progresses into higher forms.

Erasmus kept the critique of practical judgment for the individual who now concentrates on moral principles, and the critique of pure judgment is handed over to the Spirit, who is present now in the form of the *magisterium* of the church. It has the job not of preserving the old, but precisely of *making new dogma*, new means by which apparent contradictions in Scripture are overcome in the form of a new synthesis. Do some Scriptures seem to imply no free will and others imply some free will regarding one's decision for trusting God? Yes. How to resolve this? The church has built a necessary synthesis that preserves the eternal and holy Law as the means of harmony, provided you understand that that is not spelled out in so many words in Scripture itself. That synthesis here indicates that God's grace is total, but not in such a way as to incapacitate obedience to the law, but rather to make obedience to the law perfect. Thus, grace and law form a perfect symmetry. What holds them together? The free will, of course. Otherwise, grace would be detached from the law altogether, or the law would cease to function with any grace. A Free will is made what it is by God and kept what it is by your own exertion, always under the helpful aid of grace. The church through its spiritual power makes this harmony of *grace*, *law* and *will* on the ground that the law has no final contradiction within itself. It is the mind of God and eternal life itself. Erasmus assumes harmony of Scripture on the basis of harmony of universal law outside Scripture, accessed only by the special power provided by the Spirit. Erasmus trusts the law, not Christ.

Spirit's two clarities and the end of the law

Luther, however, made the distinction to end all distinctions. The law is not the means of harmonizing Scripture. It is not the mind of God or God's final will. It was never given to make anyone right. It does not lead to salvation. In fact, in that sense the goal of an interpreter of Scripture is not harmony, but distinction – disharmony. The universal unity of law under the judgment of a spirit-led judge is not the basis for overcoming contradictions in Scripture. In fact, the goal is to set these two as far apart as the East is from the West – Law and Gospel. From Erasmus' point of view Luther could only be a radical destroyer of harmony by placing *himself* where the

communal and spirit-led *church* belonged. In the same way Hegel concluded that Luther unearthed inner testimony but then destroyed the scientific community in slavish obedience to the church's sacraments and so remained "medieval." In other words, Erasmus could only see Luther as a Pied Piper leading the individual lemmings off the modern cliff into abject individualism because the one universal thing, the law, was being abandoned. Erasmus knew where that would lead – God would be left blameworthy for the lack of faith, for people not hearing, and hence for evil itself. Then no one would choose to believe.

One could well say that this is a good prophecy of the future of modernity. It shifts the role of the Spirit to the individual's judgment and thus into a foundationless world that makes everything relative to the self so that even reason ceases to be a shared universal and becomes tribal, then familial, then personal only. But all that assumes that contradictions in Scripture have their resolution outside of it in the universal, eternal law alone. Instead, Luther worked with two universals, distinguishing them at every turn and, worse yet, one of the universals bows to the other; the law succumbs to the gospel for those who have faith. The gospel is not some individual's judgment, but is God's own eternal promise made in the accidental world of history via the preaching office. The first job of the preacher is to destroy the world that is flesh, and for this the law has its proper place. Thus texts that may be in conflict with one another on such a topic as free will are not to be harmonized outside the Scriptures in the church's spiritual interpretation of the eternal law. Nor are you as an individual left with mere skepticism. Instead, when one hears the gospel preached for you as authorized by the specific words of Scripture, the eternal law ceases – it ends. Only the promise of Christ in his cross remains as the life of a completely new creature which we call simply *faith*. How new? So new that the old person is dead in the flesh due to baptism, and now lives life with the law behind him.

Luther saw in Erasmus a "Christ-less, Spirit-less" use of Scripture "chillier than very ice."¹⁷ So when Luther came to describe the Spirit he makes two key points. The Spirit is an "assertor," a person who is doing battle with this old world and especially with the person in it who is seeking by law to be made righteous. Morality likes to replace Christ; and an "inner self" without a preacher, in unmediated unity with Spirit, likes to replace the Holy Spirit. But the Holy Spirit is no skeptic. The Spirit does not sit idly by and wait for human discovery. The Spirit knows what history leads to and what any individual is up to. The Spirit is not surprised by the opposition, especially in religion, to his invasion of the world. The revolt of humanity to the

17 Ibid., p. 75.

apocalypse does not catch the Spirit unaware. The Spirit is undaunted and asserts himself anyway.

The second of Luther's teachings on the Spirit is that the Scripture is the Holy Spirit's weapon for waging the eschatological battle. God is not hiding in the text: he is attacking there, going public in opposition to sinful inwardness. In other words, Scripture is clear, it is not obscure, although in its clarity it is bringing destruction to the old creature and world. Most especially, it is destroying the last vestige of self-righteousness in the good, divine law itself. Clear Scripture does not await an interpreter, and in fact, is used by the person of the Holy Spirit as the form of attack on a freakish free will that attempts to commune with it by means of its own created nature instead of a preacher. The devil uses the sentiment of obscurity, a recondite text, to scare off sinners from reading the Sacred text altogether with its mortal blow to human work and the law. Trinity, incarnation, and the sin against the Holy Spirit are not obscure doctrines requiring interpretation from a church magisterium. They are the cold, hard truth of the apocalypse. They are the facts of death in this old world and life in the next. Those facts are not dependent upon the community of church for their truth. They are not a product of individual, enthusiastic fancy or collective agreement to operate by certain rules of grammar. They are not only true externally of the thinking subject, but these truths are out to get us! They are persons who are waging eschatological battle against us as "free wills."

This means that Scripture is not a book of obscure thoughts, but it is clear in two essential ways. Herein lays Luther's famous reference to the two-fold work of the Spirit. He does not use "external" and "internal" as neutral descriptors, nor as the age-old distinction between subject and object, but as opposition to the two horns of the dilemma of Erasmus' prophecy of modernity. Truth is first "external and relates to the ministry of the Word."¹⁸ There is the first clarity. Unlike Erasmus' neutral observer trying to discover truth by first removing untruth through the means of purging doubt – the Epicurean skepticism –, truth arrives by means of the preacher. The preacher is not one human being lording it over another as in Hegel's picture of a master and slave. Instead, the preacher is sent by the Holy Spirit (Rom 10:15) and holds a divine office. The Ministry of the Word is the preaching that preaches Christ and him crucified as the sole justification of the ungodly while they are yet ungodly. This is what Erasmus worked so hard to remove from Scripture. He takes out Christ and the Holy Spirit. No wonder the thing seems obscure like the cave of Corycos. All of Scripture is proclamation, and the proclamation is not moral precepts: it is this one thing that Christ alone is our righteousness apart from the law who is given for you

18 Ibid., p. 73.

by faith alone. This is in direct opposition to morality. It is an attack on the moral individual. What kind of God would do that? Erasmus wanted none of that divinity and succored himself on theodicy.

But then Luther attacked the second horn of Erasmus' delusion. The solution to the problem of the individual sinner is not the collective community, in the form of a church that can add doctrine not already in Scripture, nor the universal community of scientific reason. The solution to individuality is not community. The solution to the isolated sinner is death. This is what the sinner does not want to know. This is where the fool says in his heart, "There is no God" (Ps 14) and shelters himself in skepticism. The second clarity is "internal," but not in the sense desired by Erasmus – an inner self unsullied by external dogma, who serves as a law unto himself and provides an unmediated connection to God via *spirit*. No, the second work of the Holy Spirit is to raise the dead, to create anew, thus *Spiritus Creator*. It is the creation of faith where there was only doubt, uncertainty, and a free will striving to be overcome nature by using the law for self-transcendence. This is the faith that clings to the external promise declared by a preacher from Christ himself, and so it is not an act of the old will, but is the new creation that comes from the promise having the proper application of the pronoun "for you." These two things are provided by Scripture: a preacher who preaches not opinions and theories, but the law of Moses and the promise of Christ, and the faith that grasps these external promises as "for me" despite the accusation of the law. Thus, preaching involves the external promise: "This is my body" and the internal grasping "given for you."

Internal is not a reference of a work done by a person, certainly not of a free will. Internal is not a self-referential relation of the self to the self who is inspecting itself to see if faith is actually found there. It is death. Death leaves the self by going into Christ by faith, grasping the external promise as applied properly to me. The Holy Spirit has a dual work, first to kill the old self, and then to raise the new self in what we may call eschatological, not epistemological, reality. So when the question was asked: "Who gives assurance? How shall we detect the Spirit?" Erasmus was on the horns of a dilemma. If you go to the Rabbis or the Church Fathers concerning the meaning of the law, what do you find? Two contradictory points of view. What to do then? Well, first skepticism! Erasmus says, "It looks as if our most sensible course is to concur with the views of the Skeptics!"¹⁹ We don't know, but we are trying to get there! Holding out hope in a free will is futile because the apocalypse has already come! But by the same token, Erasmus sought to become obedient to some external authority that claims to be speaking for the Holy Spirit – a charismatic individual or a collective subject in the form of

19 Ibid., p. 123.

the papacy. Skepticism or Fanatic Spiritualism! That is quite the choice for a free will to need to make. No doubt the world is filled with those who have made their choice, and not many choose the church any longer.

Who will be the judge if no one outside Scripture is capable of acting as a neutral arbiter? Judgment must be made, Luther agrees, but he returns to the double clarity of Scripture and the double work of the Holy Spirit in the eschatological sense in reviewing Erasmus' *Introduction*. There he switches to what the internal and external clarity of Scripture means for the Christian person rather than the person of the Holy Spirit. For the person who has faith, there is a double judgment – and the spirits must be judged accordingly as false or true, holy or unholy. From this anthropological side the first judgment is the internal – that is the effect of the Holy Spirit's gift of faith in the new creation. This new person's internal spirit is experienced as certainty – the direct opposite of skepticism. Were this not a new creation, it would be pride in the extreme, but this is not in reference to the old free will or the law. It is in reference only to the enlightenment of the Holy Spirit, who is now making you lord of all doctrine and all "opinions of men." The church is not making this judgment for you. Nor are you operating out of doubt because of the limits of human reason. Instead, this is unity with the Holy Spirit, who upon freeing you from the law itself has made a creature who now is not being judged by law, but is the judge over everything and everyone – because *you are now judge over the law itself*. One who does not have trust in the promise of Christ "for me" knows nothing of this, and certainty seems to be a façade, an overweening, dangerous, religious pride. But Luther is simply laying out the implications of Paul's comments following the preaching of Christ crucified for sinners: "The spiritual man judges all things, but he himself is judged by no man" (1 Cor 2:15). Nothing is higher than faith. Reason is not higher than faith, nor is experience or feeling. Faith judges *everything*, including reason and feeling. Faith is not a power of the old human encumbered by sin and limited in knowledge to the moral precepts. It is not the situation of a human from whom God is hiding his full truth. It is a new person created by the Holy Spirit, and so entirely a work of that Spirit. So, Luther says, this is what earlier was called the internal clarity of Holy Scripture. Now it is in reference to the new creature. Here he calls it certainty, and certainty is judge over all. It is the flip side of the coin of the Spirit's clarity in Scripture, which is not about this or that perspective on a statement in Scripture, but is about the death and resurrection effected by the preaching office as the instrument of the Holy Spirit. The Spirit is that one who is waging war against the powers of this old world, especially free will. When two Church Fathers or Rabbis disagree about the teaching of Scrip-

ture, who will adjudicate? Answer: the judgment of the Holy Spirit!²⁰ But this judgment is not accessible from a neutral position which allows space for a free will to determine whether it will accept such judgment. Instead, it only matters “for those who have it,” as Luther says, which is those who have undergone the death and resurrection of the work of the Holy Spirit. Does the teaching distinguish properly between law and gospel? If not, throw it out.

The second judgment is then “external,” since we must first make reference to faith (internally) which asks whether Christ’s promise was really given to me. Now the question takes leave of the “for me” and asks about the benefit of Christ *for others*. Now this judgment “is the province of the public ministry of the external office, and is the special province of the public ministry of the Word and the external office, and is the special concern of teachers and preachers of the Word.”²¹ For Luther, *internal* concerns whether the preaching was really for *me* or not. The *external* takes up the work of how to preach this to *others*. This requires how a preacher finds promises to give, apart from the law, and to whom those promises actually belong. This is not the process of churchly addition to doctrine that is not in Scripture, nor the community saving the individual from solipsism. It is going to the one place where the promises for preaching are found, to the actual words of Scripture alone: “We hold that all spirits should be proved in the sight of the church by the judgment of Scripture. For it should be settled as fundamental, and most firmly fixed in the minds of Christians, that the Holy Scriptures are a spiritual light far brighter even than the sun, especially in what relates to salvation and all essential matters.” Scripture, not church tradition, not ongoing church authority, not the inspired individual. Scripture alone. The external judgment of the Holy Spirit means becoming instruments of the Holy Spirit in doing battle in this old world – including the battle against a church or any society that seeks to make of Spirit the ongoing power of creating new laws. As Luther says, “we shall do battle against ‘free will’ for the grace of God.”²² That battle is not an epistemological or ontological one. It is an eschatological battle, and it is fought by preaching.

Luther’s exegesis *distinguishes*; it does not *harmonize* on the assumption that the universal law cannot be in conflict with itself. The law indeed comes to a fundamental conflict with itself! It has an inner contradiction, not an inner unity. It cannot deliver on its generalized promise (which is only made by angels and through Moses anyway) since God trumps it. Luther learned this from Paul, especially in the letters to the Galatians and Romans. Were it not for the gospel of Jesus Christ, law is all you or I would have to hope. But now that the gospel has come, you can’t go back to the old exegesis of

20 Ibid., p. 124.

21 Ibid., p. 125.

22 Ibid., p. 136.

Erasmus that tries to harmonize contradictory requirements of law by using a free will – because before God you have no free will. The law demands you use a free will that you don't have. To attempt a patch job by saying that God will mercifully supply the will to you when you need it only raises the problem to new levels – how much grace and how much freedom do you have? Is it more religious to emphasize the grace side and reduce the freedom side to a tiny speck, saying I am a worm and no man and hoping my humility is met with God's favor, or is it more religious to say that God helps those who help themselves and so emphasize my will as making the first or final move?

Luther simply jumped off the train that harmonized apparent contradictions in the law. Erasmus showed the contradictions, but at the last minute – and this is what makes him modern – he does a rough patch job, saying he would surrender his individual freedom to the collective rather than succumb utterly to skepticism. Faith for Erasmus is a self-reference. For Luther it is a reference to the external word of the preacher to which the ear or heart clings for those who have ears to hear. For Erasmus faith makes its entrance at the limit of reason, like a white knight on a horse, saving us from despair, but for Luther faith is resurrection from the dead lived outside the law in Christ alone.

Conclusion

It was a terrific misunderstanding of Luther to take inner clarity of the Holy Spirit to be a self-reference, a person seeking his own faith. A recognition emerged in the nineteenth century that somehow this reference to inner clarity was either the key to the Reformation itself, or it was, as Hegel's disciple David Friedrich Strauß put it, the Achilles' heel of the Reformation.²³ It appeared to the great minds of the descendants of the Reformation that the Spirit's inner clarity either began the process of enlightenment that threw off the shackles of the papacy, or that this reference from Luther plummeted the Lutherans and Reformed into enthusiasm just as with Müntzer, Zwingli, and the subtle sacramentarians, so that Rome could rightly claim that all their talk of Scripture alone was nothing other than individualist buzzing bees circling a hive that knew nothing of the community that preserves and transmits truth over time.

23 David Friedrich Strauß, *Die christliche Glaubenslehre in ihrer geschichtlichen Entwicklung und im Kampfe mit der modernen Wissenschaft*, Tübingen 1840, I: 136.

The Spirit, for Luther, never works without the external word and so never without the preacher.²⁴ The attempt of the modern world to rid itself of a preacher is none other than the fight against the Holy Spirit waged in this old world and led by the devil. Of course, a modern man deludes himself into thinking that he is doing the work of the Holy Spirit and confuses things so badly that he claims his enemies are really fighting on his side – including Luther. Nowhere has this been more apparent than in the modern attempt to make Luther not-quite modern and not-quite medieval, as with Hegel, by mangling his teaching on the inner clarity of the Holy Spirit. This includes the reformed attempt to make this into inner testimony of the Holy Spirit. It is best to take the testimony of the Spirit in Romans 8:16 not as “with,” but “to,” my spirit. But even if the testimony is “with our spirits” this does that not make inner testimony an ability to listen inside the self to the faint echo of the Holy Spirit’s external proclamation. In other words, *internal* cannot be made the work of the self examining itself for signs of faith rather than the death of the self and the going out of self by means of clinging to an external, preached word. The testimony of the Spirit to my spirit is not an internal echo of the Spirit, but is taking leave of the self to grasp the external promise of Christ as “for me.” But the “me” that was is dead, and the me that is, is Christ’s own new creation. This is decidedly not the fulfillment of law, but the end of the law. The new me lives by faith alone, apart from works of the law.

Luther’s argument about inner and outer is entirely a product of the Holy Spirit’s eschatological work of death and resurrection. It is entirely in reference to the external preacher and the faith that clings to the external promises “for you” after the apocalypse. There are two assertions, both awful and amazing in their scope. There is an apocalypse wrecked by the Holy Spirit against the whole world. Then, there is a life after the apocalypse with no judge, but only being a judge over all. When “inner” was turned against preaching by Erasmus, Luther was directly fighting against him. Of course, history would take Erasmus’ side; it was forced to do so since the world must take its own side against the Holy Spirit’s invasion and condemnation. It must protect itself against God. The only way to accomplish this is to get rid of the Holy Spirit that does battle with this old world, and to do that the old world had to attack the preacher as a foreign imposer of doctrine. Free will is a new construct put in place of the preacher that is assigned the job of making decisions based on a higher faculty than faith, which is reason or feeling. In doing so the gospel itself was lost, and all that remained was the law. Then the law was split into a lower and higher sort, the lower sort ac-

24 “For God will not give you his Spirit without the outward word; so take your cue from that. His command to write, preach, read, hear, sing, speak, etc., outwardly was not given in vain.” WA TR 2: 57, 31, 24 (no. 1340).

cuses in the form of the imposition of dogma from the outside by self-imposed preachers. The higher sort was that which was internal and represented the possibility of being something more, something divine, if nature was overcome in the higher use of spirit, and therefore represented to the self the possibility of having a law that did not accuse, but instead rectified. To find this law, one had to discover it "internally," so that the Spirit communicated directly without foreign (preacherly) intervention. The means of communing with Spirit is to anticipate what the Spirit wants of us and do it before we are required. Thus, "inner" became the lord who creates law for himself that is higher than that imposed by others from the outside.

Scripture comes under suspicion for imposing an outdated, external law that fights against true, higher spirit, and thus we tumble into the modern world's belief in freedom as *autonomy*. Faith then becomes a lower form of existence that starts the process of higher communication that gains a like mind to the Spirit. The Spirit testifies to my spirit (Romans 8:16) came to mean a particular divinization that is none other than my participation in divinity by means of the law. This way of thinking has posed a false decision for moderns to make: is the truth of Scripture somehow left behind as an historical artifact, a bygone era's form of the law that requires the person's inner self to produce new spiritual laws? Or is the best way to overcome individualism to become obedient to the church, though there seem to be many churches at present? Does one find the true church by means of historical continuity, of evidence of the Spirit to make new laws not in Scripture, or by some other communal solution to the benighted individual? Everything presently seems to shipwreck on Erasmus' question: "Who gives us assurance? How shall we detect the Spirit?" Luther knew that all of this was sheer enthusiasm, fanaticism. Luther's answer to the question of how we detect the true Spirit is disturbing and simple: It is Scripture, preached by a true preacher in law and gospel; so that Christ's unconditional promises are trusted by faith as "for me." However, this requires a truly external preacher in a most external office that is in the act of invading this old world and putting me to death, only then to promise a new life that is not yet felt, known, or experienced by worldly means. Most especially, it means the end of the law as righteousness happens as an historical reality in Christ's cross. This cross the "modern" world does not abide. It would rather become a skeptic or an obedient disciple of some "church" before it underwent this assault by the Holy Spirit. It does not want "inner" to be the work of the Spirit first to kill, then to raise me from the dead. It wants "inner" to be preservation and transcendence of my old, created self. It wants "inner" to belong to free will, not Holy Spirit. It wants the law to be its righteousness. It wants morality as its truth. It wants anything but Christ alone, faith alone, Scripture alone. Yet, when the Holy Spirit wages war, he will not lose.